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SUBJECT: RTG HACHET MAN TAKES AXE TO MEDIA, BUT WOUNDS HIMSELF

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Summary

¶11. (SBU) Embattled Prime Minister's Office Minister Jakrapob Penkair suffered another blow when the Democrat Party filed a motion on May 21 to impeach him. Jakrapob, the bête noir of the media, has been accused of abuse of power and lese majeste. This is the latest chapter in a series of running battles between the Prime Minister's outspoken media maestro and the media itself and has prompted activists to accuse the new Samak administration of chipping away at media freedom in Thailand. End Summary.

The Battle Begins

¶12. (U) On May 21, the minority Democrat Party filed a motion in the Senate to impeach Jakrapob Penkair on grounds of abuse of power and for crimes against the monarchy (see septel for more on the latter).

The Democrats charge that, as the minister responsible for overseeing state media through the government's Public Relations Department (PRD), Jakrapob has played political gamesmanship by transforming the state-owned television station, Channel 11, into the National Broadcasting of Thailand (NBT) and wielding it as a tool to cudgel political opponents. The impeachment documents submitted by the Democrats will be reviewed by the Senate Speaker on Monday, May 26, and then forwarded to the National Counter Corruption Commission for consideration.

¶13. (SBU) But accusations of unfair meddling with the media have bedeviled Jakrapob from the moment he took office. He launched the initial strike in his first public statement the day he was sworn in, saying that he intended to "sort out" Thai media and added that he would "manage" news reports of some media outlets to ensure impartiality and accurate reporting by establishing government committees to monitor state media news coverage.

¶14. (SBU) Even before Jakrapob took office, the media was bracing for confrontation. TV Thai Acting Director Thepchai Yong said that he was deeply concerned about the Samak government's actions towards the media and believed that it was trying to scuttle TV Thai because it was seen as anti-Thaksin (Note: Thailand Independent Television (TITV), formerly Thaksin's Shin Corp-operated iTV, was transformed into TPBS under the 2008 Thai Public Broadcasting Act. In April, TPBS rebranded itself as TV Thai. End note). Thepchai told the PAO and IO privately, "It is ironic that we have more to fear from a democratically-elected government than the last [military] one."

¶15. (SBU) Many believe that television Channel 11 was rebranded and relaunched as NBT on April 1 to counter TV Thai's perceived anti-Thaksin bias. The government claimed that the transformation of Channel 11 sought to produce programs with more quality and

diversity and would "focus on the concept of impartiality, fairness, transparency, and rapidity in all situations." Many observers believe that the move was aimed at neutralizing TV Thai and that the new, reformatted NBT will serve purely as a mouthpiece for the government, without any journalistic integrity.

¶ 6. (SBU) The bad blood between Jakrapob and TV Thai continues. In a speech at the Foreign Correspondents' Club of Thailand on May 8, Jakrapob said that TV Thai was the product of a dictatorship and was wrongly conceived and implemented. He said, "I would not do anything to jeopardize it [TV Thai]. I will create the NBT to compete with it. I will tell society that NBT, which is a state-run organization under a democratic government, is able to produce TV programs useful and relevant to the public's interest."

Right Hook to PRD and an uppercut to MCOT

¶ 7. (SBU) In addition to sparring with TV Thai, Jakrapob has landed several jabs at other media institutions. Jakrapob's first public controversy came earlier on, when he signed the order to transfer PRD Chief Pramote Rathavinit, who was appointed as chief under the Surayud government, to an "inactive" post. Though Jakrapob claimed he made the move so Pramote could support an important, new ASEAN initiative, the action raised eyebrows among media observers, who believed Pramote was removed due to his connection to the former coup-appointed government and for his anti-Thaksin tendencies. Pramote was quick to shoot down the Samak administration's idea of launching a new television station to counter TV Thai, stating that it was not legally possible. A year before, Pramote played a significant role in the banning of pro-Thaksin station PTV from going on air in March 2007. (Note: This is not the first time Pramote, a long-time PRD official and civil servant, has been removed from this politically-sensitive position. Pramote was PRD chief under former Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai before being

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transferred to an inactive post at the PM's Office during Thaksin's first term. End note.)

¶ 8. (U) Just weeks later, Jakrapob suggested that the president of Mass Communications Organization of Thailand (MCOT), Wasan Paileeklee, be removed because the organization failed to make a profit. These seemingly innocuous words caused a firestorm of criticism directed at Jakrapob, who was charged with meddling in affairs outside his purview since MCOT is a private company, not subject to regulation by PRD. MCOT labor union president Orawan Klimviratkul said if Mr. Wasan was to be forced out it should be the board's decision, not the government's. Some observers asserted Jakrapob had hoped that by removing Wasan, he could install an ally in this position. The ensuing criticism stung Jakrapob, who backed down, and the MCOT chief kept his job. (Note: Wasan was appointed by the board of MCOT Plc. to a four-year term in April 2007 after former MCOT president Mingkwan Saengsuwan, now Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Commerce, resigned in the aftermath of the September 2006 coup. Though MCOT is a privately-held company, more than 70% of its shares are owned by the Ministry of Finance and several of the board positions are held by government officials. End note.)

A Body Blow to Chirmsak

¶ 9. (SBU) On February 13, a well-known radio host and former senator, Chirmsak Pinthong, "voluntarily" took his popular talk radio show off the air on FM 105, a PRD-operated station. Chirmsak said he pulled his show due to concern from executives after he criticized PM Samak for comments he made during a CNN interview in which Samak alleged that only one demonstrator died in the 1976 student demonstrations. However, Chirmsak later reportedly told the media that his production house told him to step down after receiving a call from Jakrapob.

Community Radio Up Against the Ropes

¶10. (SBU) In April, Jakrapob hosted a meeting in eastern Thailand with several dozen representatives from community radio stations. (Note: Community radio stations thrive in rural areas like eastern Thailand, where they are often the primary source of news for small towns and villages. End note.) During the meeting, Jakrapob reportedly offered to help community radio stations operating without licenses avoid arrest, if they agreed to allot 2-3 hours of airtime a day to government-sponsored programming. The Thai Broadcast Journalists Association (TBJA), in an April 23 statement condemning the proposed action, accused Jakrapob of abusing his power in order to control community radio. Supinya Klangnarong of the Campaign for Popular Media Reform told embassy staff she feared any such move by the government would put stations that did not agree at increased risk of arrest by the authorities.

No Coups is Good News

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¶11. (U) In May, Jakrapob announced that he would prohibit PRD staff from reporting any news stories mentioning or referring to possible coups. He said in a statement to reporters: "Staff of the state media who encourage a coup either directly or indirectly would be regarded as committing a disciplinary offence." Though this order did not extend to commercially-owned newspapers and magazines, or to community radio stations, as they do not fall under the PRD, Jakrapob did call on reporters at private companies to use their judgment before reporting even the possibility of a coup. Again, the media bristled at being lectured by the Prime Minister's Office Minister and felt that Jakrapob's words were meant to intimidate.

Comment: With Friends Like These...

¶12. (SBU) Jakrapob rose to prominence as a disciple of ousted Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. When the People's Power Party (PPP), Thaksin's de facto political party, won the December election, Jakrapob was well-placed to land a cabinet position.

¶13. (SBU) The winds of change have not blown well for Jakrapob, however. The investigation into his alleged offense against the monarchy has brought criticism from within his own party. Despite the perception that many of Jakrapob's actions with the PRD and against TV Thai have been to neutralize Thaksin's old enemies, his patron Thaksin appears to have kept him at arm's length lately. The former PM stated publicly on May 21, "If Mr. Jakrapob cannot make this thing clear, he should retreat." For his part, the current PM

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has said, with slight exaggeration, that his entire cabinet, himself included, was under investigation for one thing or another, and he refused to fire Jakrapob. The media, not too surprisingly, has painted a picture of Jakrapob as being isolated and abandoned.

¶14. (SBU) Jakrapob's criticism of the media as being biased, unprofessional, prone to relying on gossip and hearsay, is not too far off the mark. Academics have recently upbraided the media for many of the same reasons. Many Thai reporters have privately expressed disdain for Jakrapob and it appears that much of the squabble between this government official and the media is personality driven. However, this mutual antipathy does not mitigate the threat Jakrapob has made to rein in the more than 3,000 community radio stations across the country.

¶14. (SBU) Rejected by allies and his patron, and now twisting in the political wind, Jakrapob finds himself in an uncertain place. It is unclear what concrete action will come of the threats Jakrapob has made against the media. What is clear is that the first five months of Prime Minister Samak's administration have been a combative time between the media and the government, with Jakrapob as the pointy end of the government's spear. End comment.

JOHN